Fabienne KANOR
Excerpts from *Humus*

The Silent One

In the beginning was absence. To say nothing, to not be. Nothing but a thing they put to use. That they abuse until its insides break.

I saw everything. Don't ask me what. Words lost will be lost forever. It'd be necessary to invent in order to do it well, to say everything that goes through my head. Words to laugh, to forget words, words to act as if. Who still pays any attention to details?

The ocean is blue. There is a boat placed upon it. So heavy that it looks like it will never be seaworthy. It is. White magic. It moves, even.

> (The ocean is visible in the distance. Nothing exceptional, really. Because of the sun, the girl scrunches her eyebrows tight, sits down on her heels and describes at short length.)

I no longer know the country's name. I was too young when they came to take me. The woman who rocked me in her arms, she, too, I have forgotten. Only the voice remains, hoarse, the voice of a crazed sky. When night falls, I recognize the enormous trees surrounding the village from which heavy oblong fruits hang like human bodies. They are called spirit-huts because the souls of the dead are locked up within them. Not in all of them. Only those that are living.

In this country dangling like a dream, I hear the river descending, growing. Taking by force the earth, men and animals. Nothing withstands it. In the sky, birds fly by. They look like the handkerchiefs women wear during times of celebration. Down below, the children take aim, scream with joy when the prey falls. Under the generous sun, I watch the kids carry on until a voice tells them to behave. The huts are shuttered. Inside, sleep enters, stinging the eyes like a red ant.

At home, the men don't know what *cry* means, their tongues have never formed the word. They are accustomed to many others, scores of them: eat, dance, cook, hunt, fish, farm.

At home, the women are always happy. Regardless of what they're doing, they hold a song in their mouth that they suck on endlessly like a piece of candy. Sometimes, late at night, the song refuses to melt away. Runs through their heads until morning. It's always the same story that dances on their lips. The same actions that repeat themselves. Eat, dance, cook...

In the hut where I was born, there is an old woman fast asleep. It's as if she has always been there, just like that, as if her many years, over a hundred in all, allow her to scan the sky and to see in the stars what tomorrow will bring. She usually announces lightning or rain. Sometimes wars, but no one believes her then. Where we live, that cruel word doesn't exist. Nor does gun, ship's hold, master or ocean.

Like my people, I am short in size. A relationship with the sun so large in the sky that it shrivels our bodies. In my village, adults resemble children. Only our faces reveal age. The oldest of our elderly have wrinkles, cotton on their head and blue in their eyes. The oldest of our elderly, on certain nights, get up. Walking stick in hand, they go into the forest. Some say that death is hiding there—the hyena that runs so fast, it enters into our dreams. No one but the trees has ever seen it. But the people no longer know how to listen.

I was too young to learn, too small to climb into the branches, to remember my way around those huts where those that aren't dead keep watch. I didn't know anything about the world when they took me. Because I didn't know what it meant to cry, I yelled when I

saw the water falling. So much water under my eyelids, how was it possible? I looked at the sky, observed the clouds. In vain. I looked for the river. Scoured the countryside. Nothing. It was in my body that it had begun to rain. In my eyes, wide open, the river was running, carrying me far from the village, into this ocean where it came each day and disappeared without a trace. Without a mouth to name them, the words fell. Joy, smile, childhood, grasshoppers, baobabs... They drowned the words without saying a thing. It was only a long time later that I realized what had happened. When nothing was left, I opened my mouth. Emptiness. Silence.

One night, they butchered my belly. The man was alone but it was as if there were a hundred of them. I didn't have a tear left when he came in. I was thinking only of my finger in my throat. This finger that would never suffice to get everything out. I thought it would be necessary to put two fingers in, a hand, an arm. Until all of the man's water left. He never came back for more, since he must have known about my finger.

Now I feel sick when I look at my hand. My legs began to feel wobbly. I bleed, clench my fists and force myself to think of something beautiful.

On the path to oblivion, those that cry out resemble us. Dark skin, frizzy hair, the same feet accustomed to darkness. No one knows where they come from, some pretend that they are from here. How is that believable? How could you think the impossible? So as not to founder in madness, there are some of us that assert the opposite. That these Negroes are not real, that they are Whites who in order to beguile us take on our likeness. White magic.

Today, a man collapsed to the ground. His eyes yellow, his ribs bulging. From his lips oozes a whitish liquid. It looks like spume. It's foaming. Like a fish about to die. The time for prayer is past, a hand seizes a stick. Strikes before breaking the chains that link the body to the rest of the group. Without a word, without looking back, we advance. Understanding that only when we are dead will we be free. Unconditionally.

I no longer know the date. Nor the place. As a result, we'll just say it was any old day. Any ordinary African village tucked in between woods and water. Having arrived the day before with a small group of ten (five of us had perished during the long trek on foot), I was just as soon sold. In a hurry to lift anchor after many long idle months, my new masters had set the price. Everything happened very quickly, the hot iron on the skin, the descent, the cry from the ship's hold when the boat set sail. An hour went by, an entire night. A whole lifetime, some might say, such was the certainty with which we felt that we would end our days there, pitched back and forth by the waves. Forgotten, forgetful of what we had been.

Identify them as you see best, I no longer remember their names. Much less their faces, turned toward the ocean, that laughed out, at last, in confronting it. I, too, was laughing.

I have.
I.
We have jumped.
Together. We have.
Jumped. Ocean. Jump!
We.
have done it.

[...]

The Old One

It was only to be expected.

No offense, but in life there are things you just know without ever having to have

experienced them yourself. It's part of a man's very nature to imagine. When he no longer knows how, it's because he's already no longer a man.

When I think back on that time, I'm not sure why but I get something like a laugh in my throat. One of those laughs that you have to spit out double quick if you don't want to choke on it.

Tonight, it's the spirit of the rain that has taken a seat in my hut and laid upon my open wounds the water that heals. The laugh is gone and I feel good. I smile thinking about our victory.

We survived. Despite the dead, the shame and the hunger. Despite the ships' holds.

That day when everything began.

It's the rainy season, the earth is waiting for water. Inside, life slumbers, sleep lingers. In the hut with the holed roof, we are lying on the mat, my husband's head right next to my shoulder. On the clay floor, pains beleaguer us. Again, my back begins to ache, announcing rain. And drops, too. Rainwater that patters and lashes the straw. Outside, people are up. Women who mill, chat, soap. Flames that glow under large kettles with dancing lids. A hand reaches toward the fire, it's Afi. That girl, she always has to stick her nose where it doesn't belong. Not even six years old and she wants to know everything about the world. And why are stars smaller than a grain of rice? And where does rainwater go when it's swallowed up by the earth?

I was like her at that age, it's no coincidence that I'm her grandmother. My sweetie, she calls me. All that because I can't ever refuse her anything, it takes a single smile from her to have me boiling my oil and preparing my dough. As for my long snakes of honey, she's crazy about them. She pretends that eating them protects her from the real ones. I think so, too.

One more hour and the millet will be ready.

Even here, I hear her voice on occasion. At first, I thought I was losing my mind but now I know that has nothing to do with it. Nothing happened back there; the women continue to mil, the millet to cook, the old women to throw snakes into the oil. Everything remains. You can't kill life. I understood that when they emptied the boat. My word! What a stench! It was surely the first time I had experienced it. But in a way, it was good. Smelling that allowed me to not see anything. To forget all the bodies that we were leaving behind. Ahead, there was tomorrow. A different country, with its trees, its huts, its flowers. Just enough to nourish my heart. To erase the ocean, and never again to fear its wrath, its jaws that had closed down upon us one fateful morning.

From inside the hut with the holed roof, I hear Akissi's voice. It's because of Afiba. She wants to know why her six year-old daughter only ever does what she pleases. A hundred times, she told her not to go too near the fire. One day she'll hurt herself and it'll be a shame for her. The girl steps away and runs off to play in the rain. Of my five children, Akissi is the most hardheaded. As stubborn as a mule, she is! I sometimes think there are too many stones in her body. That it takes water to make a woman. He showed up too late, the guy that married her; there are certain things for which you shouldn't dawdle.

I was thirteen when I first slept with the man laying next me. He taught me everything, I gave him everything. That's why the children came so quickly. Abla, Totou, Afoué, Akissi, I'm not going to name the last one; the dead don't belong to us.

I was a good mother. I'm proud of my kids even if I don't always agree with them and even if Kissi worries me at times. My mother says that you just have to let things be because we don't amount to much in the big picture and, really, only the Gods know. I do as she says but continue to think that my daughter should be more gentle.

Up until blood was flowing on the mat, I swear I didn't feel anything that morning. Just another day where the women were going about their business. It was the silence that woke me, then suddenly the cry, my name. Outside, someone was yelling.

In spite of all of the red covering the mat—the sleeping man at my side is dead—, I find the courage to stand my old body up and to go see what Akissi wants. Who is it that brought death this very morning into my hut?

I was the last to be captured. The work had begun at daybreak. I was sleeping. There are things that have to be done early.

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I wasn't thinking I could hold on. Traipsing my body all day long, keeping it away from the whip that lashes out in one large crack because there's no tarrying, they don't have time to waste with the feeble. The worst is not knowing where to go. All my life I've known where to put my feet, which path, of all those to choose from, was the right one—the one that leads directly to the village. I was the mother of five, I knew what to do in order not to stray. The pebbles you leave behind you, the pieces of clothing that you tie on trees. The wind that blows and, in gently arching the grass, shows you what you are looking for: the direction. Before, there was always a path. What your eyes don't see, your heart knows. Which is why I stopped looking. I turned my thoughts to home and continued to advance. At the end of the path was Badagry. A town in the middle of nowhere. Inside: a large square. Noise. I had never seen so many people! Negroes but men with red skin, too, their skin so fine you could see the blue veins running beneath it. It was also in their mannerisms that they were intriguing. Those strange words falling from their mouths. Those right angles chiseled into their faces that made it look like they were always angry. And they surely were. They were angry when they started yelling at us before they threw us in the hole.

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In the beginning, there were only about ten of us, women from all over Africa, crowded into that small room where all you had to do was close your eyes to think that death had come for you. With the pain that was coursing through my bones, not being able to lie down made me scream in agony, and only the gentle touch of someone else's hands loosened the knots and stopped the tears. In the morning, praise the Lord returned. A new day where, busy with various tasks, the body forgot the soul. And set it aside somewhere in the secret hopes that it might get lost. It was so vast outside and so small inside that the soul might very well forget to return. When there began to be too many of us, we heard noises. They were coming from outside. The night was filled with them. It sounded as if the entire universe had started to break apart. To break apart so loudly that one woman said that it was our graves that they were digging.

It was from that moment on that we began to be on the lookout. Each night, each of us in turn, we kept watch so that at the instant the noises stopped and the door opened, we would be ready to leave. We'd have to move quickly then, like the wind. Pressing on until, a long way off, we reached utter silence.

We never did reach it.

One evening, everything ceased. The door opened. Armed with fire sticks, men forced us out of the hole and into a shed. A section of a hut, really, that reminded me of the enclosure where we kept our animals. So this was our new home! From which we would leave for the big country Lamer.

Lamer, a thousand times I had heard the name. Entire nights, I had dreamt of it. The end of the voyage. How could I have known at the time that after Lamer would come solid ground? That on that ground would spring water. The very water that flows into the ocean, and that it would never end!

In the new cage, too, there was a never-ending flow. From ten we became twenty, forty, until we could no longer count, our weary eyes having ceased to look up each time the door creaked. I never had the courage to look the other women in the face. Even in the end, I didn't know how to do it. The fear to read in their eyes my own mortification, the

shame to still be there, me the useless one, with *wrinkled skin, sagging breasts, bottom of the barrel*, held captured for weeks, and whose life would surely end here.

[...]

The Employed One

It wasn't the first time. I'd already done it several times. It was my job and I'm someone who's professional. Generally, people like me look for excuses to justify their actions, invoke misfortune, destitution, chance. They invent pretexts out of fear of being judged and treated like bastards. In those cases, there's always someone who will pretend to understand, someone nice who listens, and absolves you: "It could have happened to anyone."

If I had to come up with a reason, I'd begin by telling you about my father. The oarsman. Someone who toils like a Negro. For the rich. Who knows the ocean and its tidal waves better than anyone. What he does, my dad, is an art in itself. No one can imagine what an ocean is like that bellows and rages because it refuses to ferry men. For me who has always seen it up close, I can tell you that you shouldn't underestimate the ocean, that you feel miniscule when it's right there in front of you. It was something else, too, to live on the coast. Ever since the arrival of the foreigners, people say the country has changed. More wars. Less kindness. Dirty money everywhere. It was better before, people concluded. And afterwards? Nostalgia makes me sick. I always want to vomit when an old person speaks up. Guardian of memory... No kidding? And what memory is that, please? What do they remember? To each his own, that's my opinion. To each his own regrets and fucking messes.

I was very young when I entered the profession. I learned fast. It was easy; to be agile and brave is all that was asked of you, to stay levelheaded each time the ocean was up to its old tricks. The hardest thing, really, was what came next. After the tidal wave, the currents, the sharks, when it was time for the negotiations, when the Whites bought and sold our prisoners. Forgive my silences, I don't feel like going into detail. I was only obeying orders. I've never been one to question authority.

And then I was promoted. I began to frequent the high society, an important gentleman introduced me to someone higher up than he, and so on and so forth until someone offered to take me on board as a steward.

Feed the prisoners, that was my job. A simple task that never really interested me; I always dreamed of being a helmsman. I could have even served as second in command if someone had given me my chance. If only, ah, if only I would have known how to seize the opportunity the night of the rebellion when all havoc broke loose and the boat, without mast or captain, on the verge of going adrift, almost ran aground on the rocks! If I had seized the opportunity that evening, I would have succeeded in changing course and exploring all of the beautiful areas of the world where the heavyweights live. But like I already said: I am not a revolutionary. Believing you can change the world makes no sense.

It didn't take long before I was no longer the only one that thought so. The day after the revolt, those that were part of the scheme were pretty shaken up. Seen as ridiculous, they were, hanging at the end of a rope, their hapless hides, serving as an example! I didn't work that day. By order of the second in command, the cauldron wasn't heated. No one ate.

For years, I did my job: I ground flour, beans, corn. Kept an eye on the gruel while it cooked, added lard, only what was necessary. Morning and evening, there was always work to do. I did it, without ever so much as a complaint; I wasn't too bad off on that boat where men dropped like flies. At least that's what they said, afterwards.

As for me, I admit having never seen such a spectacle before. Of course I heard

their shouts, the chains rattling, their heads stubbornly beating against the hull. I could see clearly that something was wrong down there but what could I have done? I'm not paid for that. In fact, I hardly had time to get used to the prisoners that were there when more would arrive. One time, eight hundred of them came on board. Eight hundred in a two-hundred-and-sixty-ton, what a bloody mess! I wonder how in the world they managed to live down there, in the hold, all of them inside, piled up on top of each other, until the dead gave up their place to the living. I never had the opportunity to get close to the bodies. Generally, the sailors disposed of them, dragged them out of the hold and threw them overboard. They carried out the job in the evening so as not to cause alarm. For that matter, it's not complicated: everything nasty took place at night when, exhausted after a hard day's labor, the guys sat down around a table and drank like fish. Hidden away in my corner, I could hear their singing, their vulgar laughter, their loud talking. I would listen until their voices drained away, until the shadows went down below to shoot their wad. They never touched me; at the time, I looked like a guy.

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Time passed and I changed jobs. After steward, I became entertainer. At first glance, it can appear simple, just the kind of job that anybody can do. In truth, entertaining is no small task; it is a key position in what one could call the captives' psychological care. Tempted to end their own life, tormented by all sorts of insanity, the captives, from the first moment they are on board, need to take their minds off things. Dance to live. Sing to forget. Laugh so as not to cry, to muffle the scream that consistently rises up when the boats leave port. If I never skimped when it came to getting the job done, I'm willing to admit that I definitely lacked motivation. To liven up zombies with a drum and an accordion, that's not my cup of tea. All I wanted to do, personally, was to continue dreaming. To set sail like a true captain.

That's why I gave up and took advantage of a boat's return to port in order to get back to the coast. I was there for about a year when *Le Soleil* docked. It was an ordinary three mast ship, neither big nor small, the holds full of barrels and trade goods. Having come from France, it had only taken a couple of weeks to arrive. It's only later that it would lose time. People say that it's after Africa that the ocean becomes angry, that at times it even lacks the will to continue advancing. In that case, there's no use trying to force it. You have to wait while saving food and water. But nature is well-made; on the route, there are always islands where you catch your breath, resupply and tend to the ailing prisoners.

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The captain of *Le Soleil* was named Moisonnier. Everyone here knew his name. He was already sailing at the time my father was an oarsman. He wasn't a brute. Just a man working for another, who had come to do his job and was in a hurry to get home. Accustomed to the country, he spoke little but effectively. Didn't barter when it came to the merchandise. Either he took it or he didn't, without ever acting in bad faith or out of malice.

You have to have a good idea of what the coast was like when I went back there to live. A lawless zone where each person implements his own rules, where money begets money, evil, evil, etc. All of the scum from Africa and Europe congregated there, trying at any price to buy or sell. You can't imagine a racket like that.

It's smack dab in the middle of all that that she alighted. One morning, shortly before *Le Soleil* left Africa and set course for Saint-Domingue. Ordinarily, I'm indifferent to beauty. The very meaning of the word escapes me, as does the effect that it has on most people around me. It's nonetheless that word that crossed my mind upon seeing the woman who, with good reason, would soon be called the Amazon. Shackled, her neck firmly held in place by a forked stick, she didn't seem to be suffering the least bit. She advanced at a steady pace, *simple as that*, like someone who is used to striking out on foot

and who couldn't care less about the chains around her ankles. All muscle, with short high nipples, she was both man and woman. It all depended on the day and the thoughts that went through people's heads when they inspected her. It didn't take long for her to be sold. The French guy bought her. He was pleased. Good captives were becoming rare. You could end up with anything if you weren't careful. Having myself seen a lot of them pass through, I knew right away that that woman's presence on board *Le Soleil* meant the personnel would have their hands full. That thanks to her, I might have work.

Because I could manage pretty well in French, Moisonnier gave me a job as overseer on his boat. While waiting for the departure, I would help out in the barracoon. We were supposed to leave port March 11, but a tropical wave kept us onshore several days longer. The Amazon used that lapse of time to her advantage, assembling her troops.

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Translated from the French by Jason Herbeck